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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

NIO #2405-75

National Intelligence Officers

13 November 1975

MEMORANDUM FOR: Robert Gates
NSC Staff

SUBJECT : Strategic and Commercial Implications
of Recent White Sea-Baltic Canal
Improvements

Bob,

Here is a response to your query on the accuracy of recent press interpretation of improvements in the Baltic-White Sea Canal, and your interest in an intelligence evaluation of the commercial and strategic implications.

Sorry it took a while, but quite a bit of piecing together of data fragments was required. [redacted] of CIA's Office of Economic Research did the piecing, with help from the Offices of Strategic Research and Office of Geographic and Cartographic Research.

[redacted]
National Intelligence Officer
for USSR-EE

Attachment
a/s

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New Developments Along the
White Sea-Baltic Canal

On 24 October 1975 the New York Times reported that the Soviet Union had "enlarged a canal" linking the Baltic with the White Sea, and the following day the Washington Post indicated that the Soviets had "built a new canal" over the same route. Both articles suggest that as a result of these improvements Soviet naval capability has been considerably enhanced.

- Both reporters have wrongly interpreted the impact of a limited modernization program on the Baltic-White Sea Canal.
- The evidence indicates that because of failure to carry out the original work program for widening of a lock, the Baltic-White Sea Canal's strategic value for movement of naval vessels has not been increased.

These articles refer to part of an overall project which has been underway for several years to deepen and improve the canals of the inland waterways in the Western USSR to permit the passage of larger ships at higher speeds. This system is becoming increasingly important because of the (1) large volume of commercial traffic carried, (2) movement of naval units and supplies, and (3) access to inland shipyards.

Improvement of the system has been a continuing process, escalating in recent years to keep pace with the development by the Soviets of a fleet of River/Sea ships. These vessels, numbering 350-400 units, are of shallow draft (12 feet maximum), 1-6,000 DWT, with limited sea-going capability and are designed to haul cargo over long distances within the USSR and to nearby overseas

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destinations. To accommodate these vessels, waterways in some sections have been deepened by 3 to 6 feet. As a result of the enlarged waterways and increased numbers of faster vessels of larger capacity there has been a significant increase in the system's capacity to move commercial and military cargo.

The White Sea-Baltic Canal, constructed in the early 1930s and usable 6 to 7 months of the year (May-November) is part of the inland waterway system. It has provided a protected and shortened passage for smaller naval vessels, including submarines, to and from the naval base near Murmansk. In the past, pontoons and transporter docks have been used to pass naval vessels with drafts exceeding 11.5 feet. According to a 1973 report this section was scheduled to be deepened to a minimum of 14.5 feet and subsequently to 18 feet. Some dredging, widening and straightening has been accomplished. However, improvements have lagged and, although volume of traffic has increased, vessels using the canal without pontoons or transporter docks are still limited to 3,000 DWT and an 11.5 feet draft. More specifically, vessel size is restricted to the above limits by the dimensions of the most northerly lock at Belomorsk, the scheduled enlargement of which has not been carried out. This lock has a sill depth of 11.5 feet, length of 500 feet, and width of 50 feet.

Moreover, there is no evidence the enlargement of this lock is underway or is imminent. Use of the lock, and therefore the northern portion of the canal, would be impossible during the period of construction, i.e., six months to a year at a minimum. An alternative and more probable solution would be construction of a lock parallel to the existing one, with the existing lock remaining in service until the new lock is completed. There is no indication, however, that such a project is contemplated in the immediate future.

With present limitations only destroyer escorts, which represent about 55% of the Northern Fleet surface vessels and 48% of the Baltic Fleet, would be able to pass through the canal. All submarines of the Baltic Fleet and 60% of those assigned to the Northern Fleet

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could pass through with the aid of transporter docks. Submarines of the Delta, Yankee, Hotel, Papa, Echo II and probably November classes would not be able to use the canal.

Commercially, these improvements add incrementally to Soviet transport capacity; presently available evidence does not allow a meaningful quantitative estimate.

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